

Group sues over grouper quotas

Argue recreational anglers shorted

Fearing recreational fishermen won't get a big enough piece of the grouper pie, the Coastal Conservation Association filed a lawsuit this week in federal court in Fort Myers challenging an amendment to the Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Management Plan.

Amendment 29 to the plan establishes catch shares, or individual fishing quotas, that specify how many pounds of grouper and tilefish a commercial fisherman can harvest in the Gulf.

"As a result, the recreational grouper fishery, which will try to continue to expand, will not," said Ted Forsgren, CCA Florida executive director. "Bag limits, size limits and seasons will be ratcheted down so as to strangle the recreational fishery."

Beginning Jan. 1, the National Marine Fisheries Service will allocate individual quotas to commercial grouper and tilefish fishermen based on their catch histories from 1999 through 2004.

The larger a fisherman's harvest during those years, the larger his quota will be. So, if a fisherman caught 2 percent of the total gag grouper landings, he would be allowed to harvest 2 percent of the 1.41 million-pound 2010 gag grouper quota, or 28,200 pounds.

There are about 950 reef fish permits in the Gulf, with some fishermen holding more than one permit.

Currently, commercial grouper and tilefish are regulated by annual quotas rather than individual quotas, so every fisherman tries to catch as many fish as he can until the quota is reached. When the quota is reached, the fishery for that species is closed.

That system triggered "derby fishing" by which fishermen race to harvest fish as soon as the season opens. Derby fishing led to closures early in the year and prompted fishermen to fish in bad weather. Under the individual fishing quota, a fisherman can fish when he wants, only having to stop when he has reached his individual quota.

"In the individual quota system, we're going to have a year-round fishery," said grouper fisherman Dean Pruitt, a board member of the Gulf Fishermen's Association. "You can fish when prices are high, and you won't derby-out. If the individual quota isn't in place, you won't have fresh, local grouper year-round. Not all commercial grouper fishermen like the individual fishing quota. "I'm not a big fan," said Eric Schmidt of Fort Myers. "The people who have been for IFQs were the top-producing fishermen who wanted to weed out all the little guys." While the commercial gag grouper quota for 2010 is 1.41 million pounds, and the commercial red grouper quota is 5.75 million pounds, the recreational target catch level for those species are 2.14 million and 1.82 million. A target catch level is the amount of fish that managers specify could be removed annually

from a fish population by recreational fishermen. The goal is to have catches at or below target levels.

Adding the quotas and target catch levels gives 11.12 million pounds, which, Forsgren said, means that commercial fishermen are allowed to take 65 percent of the red and gag grouper harvested in the Gulf. The quota program won't change current allocations of fish between commercial and recreational fishermen, said Andy Strelcheck, a fisheries service biologist.

Pruitt said Forsgren's argument doesn't work because recreational grouper harvest statistics are not accurate, and recreational fishermen could surpass the target catch level without officials knowing it.

"We document everything we catch," Pruitt said. "We're tracked by vessel monitoring systems. We have our catch on paper, on trip tickets, in log books. Every time a recreational fisherman comes in, he doesn't have to report to the state. "We're accountable for every move we make; the recreational sector is not accountable. It's not their fault. It's the way the system is managed." The grouper and tilefish individual fishing quota program is the second catch share program for Gulf fish; a red snapper individual fishing quota went into effect in 2007.

"The red snapper IFQ is working well to save fish and help fishing communities," said Pam Baker, senior policy adviser for the Environmental Defense Fund. "We expect to see the same benefits by adding grouper and tilefish. National Marine Fisheries is taking a portion of the harvest and managing it better. That's good for everybody, whether you're a commercial fisherman, a recreational fisherman or somebody who just loves nature."

1. Why is there a limit on the size and number of groupers fisherman can take?
 2. How is the limit of fish you can catch calculated?
 3. Why are fisherman opposed to the new change in the fishing rule?
 4. Propose another method, other than annual limits, of preserving the grouper population.
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